

GAME MISCONDUCT

The Dartmouth Cobras
By
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Prologue

October

The players on the flat screen above the hard liquor skated in reverse as the bartender rewound the game. *Again*. Piss-drunk fans crowded around the bar cheered as though watching the winning goal live, and thrust their empty glass mugs out for refills. Tap beer was on the house whenever the home team won. First time in a while the *generous* policy would cost the *Red Claw's* owner a dime.

"Perron passes to Vanek. Vanek winds up, shoots . . . Scores!" The announcer shouted as cheers erupted from the stadium crowd. "The Cobras win!"

Max Perron lifted his beer in acknowledgment as strangers slapped his shoulders and yapped about his wicked setup. Finally, they backed off him to surround Tyler Vanek, rookie extraordinaire.

"Naw, Thornton don't scare me!" Vanek laughed and thumped his chest with his fist, his tone dropping as he aped the Wild's enforcer. "You wanna go? You wanna go?" He paused to accept a beer from the pretty young waitress who'd been hovering and took a swig. "Sure, man, just let me drop this off in your net."

Freakin' mouthpiece. One corner of Max's mouth crept up. Maybe he should remind the kid he'd be gumming his buffalo wings if their good buddy Dominik Mason hadn't dropped the brute like a bag of manure.

He's got their attention. Why ruin a good thing? Max fished in his pocket for his cell phone to check for missed calls. *Maybe I'll have a reason to slip out early.*

The scuffing of shoes at his side brought his head up.

"She won't call, Perron." His captain and best friend, Sloan Callahan, gave him a grim smile. "Her and Coach have been together for three months — they won't be breaking up any time soon."

"Coach Stanton's a dick. Oriana will figure it out eventually." Max gulped some beer to wash down the bitterness clogging up his throat. "We talked before the game. She didn't sound happy."

Sloan sighed and rested his forearms on the shiny, black bar top. "Paul's good at smoothing things over with her. They're probably having make-up sex as we speak."

Make-up . . . his stomach clenched like he'd gotten a good gut check. He groaned as he pictured her soft body laid out on the bed she shared with Coach, her beautiful eyes squeezed shut as she rose to each hard thrust.

"Fuck, man!" He slammed his bottle on the bar and stood. "*Seriously?* You really think I need to hear that?"

"Yeah, I do." Sloan nodded towards the back door of the bar. "I got Roxy for the night. Why don't you join us — have a bit of fun? You haven't had any since you got hung up on that girl."

Rolling his eyes, Max finished his beer. He had plenty of fun — just the other night he'd swapped Vanek's equipment with the goaltender's. Pranking the rookie was worth a couple of laughs.

You fixin' to tell Callahan messing with the kid is enough for you? He smirked and considered. Might throw the man off for a second . . . His lips tightened. *The man's dealt with all my kinks so far. I doubt that would faze him.*

Across the packed bar, he spotted Roxy, illuminated by the bright, red exit sign. Her pouty, crimson lips curved when she caught him looking. She flipped her sleek, blond hair over one shoulder and tipped her head towards the door. The invitation alone was

enough to make his dick swell against his thigh. He adjusted his jeans to give it some space.

Roxy slipped two fingers in her mouth. Her cheeks drew in as she sucked hard.

Naughty little whore – and damn proud of it too.

"Turning tricks just does it for me," she'd told him once. "Being with different guys every night, sneaking around . . . I'm careful, I'm clean, and I'm expensive enough to be picky. I don't see nothin' wrong with it. Do you think I'm a freak?"

"No, I don't think you're a freak." He'd indulged in a rare moment of post-coital cuddling with the hooker in the backseat of Sloan's classic 'stang. Inhaling the hot scent of sex mixed with Roxy's spicy perfume, he'd felt so at ease he'd made a confession of his own. "I just wish I could find a girl like you who'd be mine – a girl who'd be okay with *my* freakiness."

"You'll find her, Max," she'd said. "But until you do, I'm perfectly happy giving you everything you need."

And she really was. So, after their intimate little chat, Max gave up looking for 'that girl' and decided to enjoy all Roxy had to offer.

Then he met Oriana Delgado.

Beautiful, sweet, easy to talk to – hell, he'd started falling for her the moment she'd stuttered his name. He had a feeling she'd *get* him . . . only Coach got to her first. And the bastard had her daddy's stamp of approval, which mattered way too much. From what she'd let slip, Coach didn't treat her good.

I would treat her like a queen. I could give her so much more

But not tonight. Tonight, she was in the arms of another man. A man she'd made it clear she wanted to be with. Nothing Max could say would change her mind. He couldn't force her to leave the man, and pining over her made him look like a fool.

The skin over his biceps tightened as he clenched his fists. He turned to Sloan. "Motel or parking lot?"

Sloan grinned and gestured for Max to lead the way out. "How 'bout the alley behind the bar? Someone might see us, but the thrill is worth the risk."

Max shuddered and nodded. He weaved through the throng of drunks, then paused beside Roxy. In a black fishnet shirt and a leather micro-mini, Roxy looked ready to be fucked. Nothing new, she always did. But this time was different. Something in her blazing, blue eyes was almost tender. Sloan must have told her about his . . . predicament.

A pity fuck. He snorted and rolled his shoulders. Not that it mattered – unless sympathy came with a discount?

Roxy frowned at his snort and reached for the metal door handle. "Shall we?"

"Yeah, we shall." Max put his hand on the door and held it open for her. "After you, ma'am."

"Uh—" She blushed and ducked out. "Thanks."

Once they'd cleared the door, he shoved her against the brick wall and braced an arm across her throat.

She let out a surprised squeak.

"Last time we were all together, you mentioned a scene you wanted to try." He bared his teeth in a ruthless smile. "Still game, babe?"

Her eyes widened, and she shivered. Her gaze flicked from him to Sloan. Then she closed her eyes and nodded.

Sloan snarled and lurched to grab a fistful of Roxy's hair. "Say it, Roxy. The money ain't worth the pain if you're not enjoying yourself. You know how rough I can be."

"Yes, Sloan." Roxy whimpered when Sloan released her. "I've been fantasizing about this for so long—I wouldn't have told you otherwise."

"Good girl." Sloan gave her a tender smile and plucked a switchblade from his pocket.

Heart hammering in his chest, Max inhaled deep as Sloan opened the knife. He'd seen Sloan scene with knives before, knew the edge was dull, but he still felt an instinctive rush of adrenaline. Logic insisted he protect the defenseless woman from the psycho with the knife. But something deep and dark reveled in Roxy's reaction to the threat. As Sloan touched the blade to her throat, her thighs shifted. The sweet musk of

her arousal mingled with her floral perfume and Sloan's cologne. Under pale flesh, a thick blue pulsed against the blade.

"What do you say if you want me to stop, Roxy?" Sloan's tone was dead calm.

The tip of Roxy's tongue flicked over her bottom lip. "Pay up."

"That's right." Sloan's expression changed, warping to one of pure insanity. "Listen to me, bitch. I had every intention of slicing you up and stuffing all your pretty pieces in that big trash bin over there." He pointed to a massive black bin across the alley from them. "But the way you moved in the bar got me all hard. I watched you all night and started thinking there might be better uses for this pretty body. Was I right?"

Roxy started to nod, then whimpered when the blade dented her flesh. "Please don't hurt me. I'll do whatever you want!"

Damn. Max rubbed his dick through his jeans and gave Roxy a heavy-lidded look as he watched for any sign that she was more scared than turned-on. She lowered one hand to the hem of her skirt and curled her fingers under the leather as though tempted to touch herself.

"Max, check if the slut's wet." Sloan's lips twitched as he glanced down. He'd noticed too. "I'm not in the mood for dry pussy tonight."

Kneeling beside Roxy, Max slid his hand up between her thighs. Her flesh quivered as he stroked her with his fingers. When he touched the crotch of her panties, she gasped.

The silken material was soaked. He pushed the fabric into her with two fingertips and grinned up at Sloan.

"She's drenched." He shoved in deeper and felt her pussy spasm. His cock twitched, and a bead of pre-cum seeped out. "I'm thinkin' she needs to be fucked."

"She will be." Sloan wrapped his hand around the nape of Roxy's neck. "But, first, she's gonna earn me sparing her life. Get on your knees, whore."

Roxy carefully eased down to her knees, hissing in each breath, eyes crossing as she tried to watch the knife, which Sloan kept pressed against her throat. The tips of her red stilettos scraped the pavement as she shifted from knee to knee.

"Stop moving," Sloan said.

"There's gravel digging into my knees." Roxy's color dropped as Sloan slid the knife across her throat like he fully intended to slice her flesh. "Please, it hurts!"

"It'll hurt more if I cut your neck, don't you think?" Sloan smiled when she nodded. "Now take out my dick and suck it. If you're good, me and my friend will fuck you and let you go."

"O-okay." Roxy brought her trembling fingers to the zipper of Sloan's black jeans and deftly freed his cock. She closed her eyes when Sloan traced her cheek with the tip of the knife. As soon as Sloan moved the knife, she swallowed his dick whole.

In the shadows of the bar, with the far-off streetlights glinting off the knife and the beads of sweat on Roxy's temples, with the black tears slipping down her cheeks, the whole scene reminded Max of a horror flick. Only, in the movies, the girl wouldn't leave the dark alley alive – no matter what she did. He stood, then took a step back to enjoy the show. Pussy juice cooled on his fingers as the wind picked up, and he brought them to his mouth to suck them clean.

Sloan groaned as Roxy deep-throated him, and Max gulped back a moan. Roxy sucking Sloan's dick with a knife held so close to her face was one of the most erotic things he'd ever seen. Not a scene he would have thought of on his own, but he couldn't deny how it affected him. His balls tightened with each wet thrust of his friend's cock between those soft, glossy lips, with the thrill of seeing things he shouldn't be seeing. The very atmosphere around them thickened with fear and arousal. Their emotions and desires wound so tight with his, he couldn't tell them apart. He felt like he'd swallowed a bottle of Viagra or something. Like jerking off for hours wouldn't be enough. Like his dick would be hard forever.

"Enjoying the show, Perron?" Sloan asked between grunts.

Max ground his teeth and nodded. He stuffed his hand in his jeans and gave his dick a hard tug. "You know I am."

"We sharing or are you just gonna watch?" Sloan raked his fingers into Roxy's hair and jerked her to her feet. "Because I need to pound this bitch's pussy."

"Do it," Max said.

"Please." Roxy's hands slapped the brick wall when Sloan shoved her away from him. "I want —"

Sloan flipped up her skirt and slapped her ass. "Shut up."

"Hey!" Roxy scowled over her shoulder at Sloan. "Careful, someone might hear."

Now she's worried? Max sighed. Much as being watched appealed to him, he had to admit, Roxy had a point. "If you're gonna play that way, maybe we should go somewhere private. She hollered so loud last time you freaked *me* out."

"Don't worry." Sloan laughed and pulled a condom out of his pocket. Once covered, he positioned himself between Roxy's spread thighs. "No one's —"

Sloan froze and stared at the mouth of the alley. Max frowned and followed his friend's gaze.

His blood ran cold when he saw who stood there, wide-eyed and pale with shock.

She turned and ran.

"Oriana!" Max bolted after her. "Oriana!"

* * * *

Oriana's throat felt scored, like she'd swallowed sand and ground-up glass. She imagined blood rising with the bile in her throat; the pain was that deep. Her soft place to land wasn't there. Wasn't soft. Wasn't . . . she didn't know what it was. What *he* was. How could he?

A horn blared, then another. Bright white headlights flashed. She stumbled back from the edge of the curb. Arms wrapped around her waist and held her tight.

"Oriana!" Max hauled her further away from the intersection. Golden strands of hair stuck to the beads of sweat on his temples. "Hell! Why didn't you stop?"

"I can't talk to you right now, Max." She pushed at his chest and sighed when he refused to budge. "Let me go."

"No. Not 'til I'm certain you'll be all right." His sharp tone softened to a soft drawl as he slid his hand down her arm to twine his fingers with hers. "Come on, darlin', let's go for coffee. I know a good place."

The 'good place' was the one they went to every time he had a home game – and the last place she wanted to be. The front of the café was filled with people winding down from hours of clubbing, but there were a few empty tables near the back where she and Max always sat in relative privacy and talked. Here, she felt smart, pretty, special. Here, the jolt came from more than caffeine. It came from just being around this man.

This man she apparently didn't know as well as she thought.

Max took her jacket to lay over the back of a chair before pulling it out for her. She perched on the seat, placed her purse on her lap, then clasped her hands together on the table. Max sat across from her and reached over to cover her hands with his.

He didn't speak at first, just looked at her, as though he sensed that, at the wrong word, the wrong move, she'd bolt. And she looked back and realized the last thing she wanted to do was leave. Being in Max's presence was like a vacation on a tropical beach. His blond hair always seemed windswept. His skin reminded her of smooth sand, glowing as though just kissed by the sun. She licked her lips, tempted to press them to the back of his hand to absorb some of his warmth. To inhale the fresh scent that clung to him, the scent of the ice, which on him smelled exactly like the surf catching the breeze.

"You came to the bar to see me." His tone was level, calm, but his hands shook with nervous energy. "Did something happen?"

Tell him!

But she couldn't. Not after what she'd seen.

Besides, vacations were temporary escapes. Not places to stay forever.

"No, nothing happened." She smiled at Max, then glanced at the door. What could she say to convince him she could walk out of there without blindly stepping into traffic again? "I just wanted to congratulate you – maybe have a couple of beers. I didn't realize you'd be . . . busy."

Brow furrowed, Max looked down at their hands and nodded slowly. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Me, too." She flushed and ducked her head when he glanced up. "I was . . . shocked. To tell you the truth, I almost called the cops. I thought you and Callahan were . . . until she said she didn't want anyone to hear. Then I realized she wanted you both to do . . . well . . . whatever you were doing."

A familiar waitress stepped up to their table and flashed a brilliant smile, her gaze, as usual, lingering just a little longer on Max. "Max, Oriana, I'm surprised to see the two of you here so late. Do you want the usual or something decaf?"

"The usual," Max said.

Oriana nodded distractedly.

After the waitress left, Max leaned forward and squeezed Oriana's hands.

"Look, I reckon the whole thing seems pretty messed up, but —"

She pulled her hands free and shook her head. "You don't have to explain, Max. It's none of my business."

"Right, then." He rubbed his face with a hand and sat back. "I just don't want this to change things between us. It's not like I do stuff like that all the time."

You don't? Then why . . . She inhaled and decided she wanted him to explain. They were friends, and they'd always been able to talk. For some reason, he hadn't been comfortable telling her about this side of him. Maybe fate had decided to step in and show her who he really was before she made any rash decisions.

Like you did by jumping into a relationship with Paul?

No, that was different. Paul was

Is unreasonable, selfish, and sometimes even cruel. But still

God, what had she been thinking hunting down Max in the middle of the night?

Not much beyond getting out of that house.

"I can't do this anymore," she'd said, stuffing all the clothes she could grab in a suitcase before slamming it shut. "It's over."

Paul had laughed. "Enough with the drama. We both know you've got nowhere else to go."

Upper lip stiff, head down, she'd hauled her suitcase to the door and grabbed her car keys. "Yes, I do."

"Right. Well, I'll leave the porch light on for you." Paul had followed her to the door, stood there, and watched her go. "And 'cause I'm such a nice guy, I won't say I told you so when you come back."

I'm not going back. She'd thought it then and she thought it now. But the certainty was gone.

The waitress brought their drinks and retreated quietly, obviously having caught some of the tension between the two. Oriana sipped her mochaccino, savoring the espresso roast and rich dark chocolate topped with just a hint of cinnamon. Max made a throaty sound of pleasure and licked some frothed milk from his upper lip. Her pulse quickened. Damn the man for being so sexy. This would be much easier if he were ugly. Or gay.

Then again, probably not. Even if he were ugly, she'd still love the way he made her feel. And if he was gay, she'd wish he wasn't.

Stop stalling. There's no easy way out. Get the facts and go from there.

She set her cup on the table and traced the glass handle with her pinky. "So you were waiting for Sloan to finish so you could –"

"Not this time. I was fine just watching." Max's cup clinked as he set it down. "I'm a voyeur. I get more out of watching than participating."

Her quickened pulse seemed to suddenly stop. She lifted her head and stared. The words left her mouth before her brain had time to filter them. "A voyeur? No, I don't believe it. I can't see you sneaking around, getting off watching people having sex. You can have any woman you want." With those big shoulders, so muscular, yet relaxed like they could carry the weight of the world effortlessly. "Voyeurs are insecure freaks that use two-way mirrors and peepholes to invade people's privacy." And that smile, the

one he was giving her now, the one that made her tingle down to her toes. "They – " She slapped her hand over her mouth to shut herself up.

Great friend she was. He'd confided in her and in return she'd insulted him.

But rather than take offence, he chuckled, then took another sip of coffee. "Don't hold back, Oriana, tell me how you *really* feel."

Her cheeks heated up. "I'm sorry. I – "

"Don't be, I'm used to it."

Like *that* made her feel any better. "Please. I want to understand."

He nodded and put his hands, palm up, on the table. When she gave him hers, he continued. "I was still in my teens the first time I ever did something that would classify as voyeurism. I walked in on a friend of mine having sex at a party. He shouted at me, told me to get out, but I just stood there – I couldn't move. Then I . . . well, let's say I did something embarrassing. The guy stopped being my friend after that. I talked to my dad about it – we've always been close so I figured he should know I had a problem. His solution was to buy me a bunch of porn."

"Did that help?"

"For a bit, but I couldn't help fantasizing about being there in person. I never did anything about it 'cause my dad gave me a lecture about intruding on people's privacy, and his word is law. I buried my 'sick urges' – my words, not his – until I got old enough to go to strip clubs. Some of the girl-on-girl action helped a little."

"I'll bet." Oriana smiled, thinking – despite his strange urges – Max was a typical guy.

Max cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, I got exactly what I needed when Sloan and Dominik invited me to a club they go to. They were sharin' a girl and"

The cafe seemed to heat up. Oriana inhaled sharply, leaning forward. "And?"

"Sloan looked right at me and asked me to join in. I was already so turned on, I didn't even think twice. First time I realized being watched pushed all my buttons too. I could feel the eyes of all the people in the club on me – like they were all sharing the experience. Like it was one great big orgy." He shook his head and combed his fingers through his hair. "After that, me and Sloan went to the club together all the time. And . . .

. well, hell, I told him all my deep, dark secrets, and he acted like it was no big deal. Said so long as the people I watched consented, it was all good. And he consents a lot."

"I saw that." The coffee and the room and her blood cooled as she pictured them. Sloan surrounded by writhing bodies and Max drinking it in, savoring every moment of ecstasy before he joined them. Not something she could participate in. *Ever*. It was just too . . . out there. Paul's attitude, his offhand cruelty, even his lackluster lovemaking, suddenly didn't seem that bad. At least it was normal. She frowned at her coffee cup. "But you do know not everyone is into —"

"Things would be different with you, sugar." He ran his thumb over her knuckles, reaching out to tip her chin up with a finger. "I'd find a way to change. You'd be enough for me."

For a split second, she was tempted to say yes. But that wouldn't be fair. She held back a sigh and finished her coffee. "You shouldn't have to change for anyone, Max. There's nothing wrong with who you are."

"But I would. I'm not telling you this because I expect you to . . ." He studied her face for a moment, then withdrew his hands. "I just want you to understand what happened tonight."

The smile on her lips felt like it had been sewn in place. She stood and pulled on her coat. "I do."

"Good." He picked up the bill and shook his head when she opened her purse. "I've got it. Just give me a sec and I'll walk you to your car."

"Thanks, but no. I need a few minutes alone to think." She focused on buttoning up her jacket so he wouldn't see the lie in her eyes. "Much as I understand, this is a lot to absorb. Besides, I'm parked right down the street."

"It's awfully late." He looked helplessly at the line in front of the cash register and the waitresses rushing to clean up after the crowd. "I'd be more comfortable if you'd —"

"This isn't Montreal. You're more dangerous than anyone I'll meet outside — *Hey!*" She giggled when he made a grab for her. For a second, things seemed lighter, brighter, their familiar playfulness a splash of yellow paint all over reality.

He caught her and wrapped her up in his great big arms, holding her close. Surrounded by his warmth, his strength, she felt her knees grow weak. She peeked up at him.

His eyes twinkled with mischief. He bent low and his lips brushed her earlobe as he spoke, letting his accent thicken his tone. "So you think I'm dangerous?"

Hell, yes. When he talked to her, in that smooth, rich voice – damn, the things he could have made her do. Thankfully, he didn't let the Southern playboy out often – with her anyway – but even without the vocal seductiveness and the face and the body, he played havoc with her concept of reality. He made her smile and laugh, made her believe in silly things like love at first sight.

But she was a Delgado. The responsible sister.

And he'd just proved he wasn't the man for her.

"You really shouldn't –" She squirmed out of his arms and the pain inside returned, even harder to swallow than before. "I have a boyfriend, Max."

His lips drew together in a thin, hard line. "After last time, I thought you were ready to end things with him. You kissed me."

Another blush flared up on her cheeks. She smacked his arm. "That's not fair. You gave me chocolate – and it was a kiss on the cheek. A friendly kiss."

"Ah, I see." He bent over and pressed a light kiss on her forehead. "Well, then, here's another." His cheek brushed hers. "And if things are going well between you and Paul, I'm happy for you, honestly. But I hope you've made it clear you won't tolerate him making you feel like shit about yourself whenever he's having a bad day."

She rested her head on his solid chest, breathing in his fresh scent, lightly tainted with beer. As she drew away the overpowering aroma of freshly ground coffee beans took over, clearing her head.

"Of course." She hooked her purse over her arm and nodded at the waitress waiting nearby. "You sure you don't want me to pay for myself?"

"I'm sure." He patted her cheek. "Might make a dent in my savings, but you're worth it."

"All right, then I guess I'll see you around," she said, even though she knew she wouldn't. She swallowed when he let her go and started to turn away. "Thank you for . . . everything."

"Yeah, well, take care. And don't you worry." His jaw worked as he paused, head down, and shoved his hand into his pocket for his wallet. "I'll be here when . . . whenever."

The bells over the door tinkled as she hurried out, desperate to get to her car before his sweet acceptance of her choices ripped apart her resolve. Before she'd reached the end of the block, the bells sounded again. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him, standing there. The gentle weight of his eyes on her back remained until she'd reached the safety of her car.

Once inside, she eyed him through the rear-view mirror. Her heart beat hard between her ears when he didn't move. Finally he stuffed his hands in his pockets and took off in the other direction.

Make a u-turn! Go tell him the truth!

Shaking her head, she started the car, then pulled out. All the way home her decision dragged her down. When she trampled up the front steps, she felt like all her bones were made of lead. The porch light blinded her as she fumbled in her pockets for her keys.

The door swung open. Paul sighed and gestured her inside. "Let's get this over with."

She closed the door softly behind her, then pulled off her jacket and went to hang it in the closet. "Get what over with?"

"You're sorry, you'll never do it again —"

Her shoulders stiffened as she turned to face him. "I'm not sorry."

His dark brown brows creased in confusion. "But you're back."

"Yeah. I'm back." She strode across the living room, kicked off her shoes, then plunked down on the stiff, white leather sofa. "And I'll be sleeping here tonight."

The grandfather clock in the hall ticked off the seconds in the silence. Paul's shadow wisped over her as he crossed the room.

"Hey, I'm giving the guys a break tomorrow." He scuffed his socks on the carpet and cleared his throat. "Maybe we can go visit your dad?"

Damn him, he always knows just what to say. Visits with her dad were . . . pleasant when Paul was around.

"I'd like that." Curling up on her side, she wrapped her arms around her chest. The dull ache wouldn't go away. Almost felt like something inside had been surgically removed. Maybe her heart.

"Okay." Paul bent down and kissed her cheek. "We'll talk more in the morning. I was a little rough on you . . . I like that you're so into the game, but this is my job. I see things different than you do."

"I know." The wet spot where he'd pressed his lips felt cold. But for some reason, the spot on her forehead where Max had kissed her still burned. *So not right.* "But a win's a win. You've gotta give the guys more credit. The goaltender was off his game. If the first line hadn't pushed so hard —"

"That's what you don't get. If they'd focused on defense like I'd told them to — they deserved to lose after that performance."

"The first line worked their asses off."

Paul pushed away from the sofa. "You mean Max."

"Not *only* him." But *he* was probably the main reason for the fight. Maybe Paul sensed something between them. And if he did, this was all her fault. She reached out to touch the back of his hand. "I really hate when you call me stupid, Paul. Just because I can't understand why you'd get so upset about your team winning —"

"And you never will." He shook his head. "We'll talk more tomorrow, Oriana. Get some sleep."

Lying perfectly still, Oriana listened to the sound of Paul ascending the steps to their bedroom. She stared at the front door for a while, feeling trapped. If only she had the guts to get up and leave again. For good.

But this was her life. What she'd chosen. What she wanted. Normal. Stable. Things would get easier once she accepted all her dreams of some great romance were just that. Dreams.

But for now . . . she closed her eyes and drifted away into a place where reality didn't matter. Where Max waited with his teasing smile and warm embrace.

Chapter One

Mid-March, 5 months later

Rock on blades in the cold, shadowed spotlight,

The words 'flag' and 'freedom' stir you.

Do not be lulled by the song.

Hear the screams, knights of the ice, wield your stick swords.

Fly the wings, break away, never shy from the crush.

Play as though at war and hear the trumpet sound.

Standing in the shadow of the blocky beast of gray slate and glass, Oriana gazed up at the glaring light coming from the high window of her father's office. In her mind's eyes, she could see the poem, written by her twelve-year-old self, etched on a bronze plaque. The plaque hung on the wall behind her father's desk among tarnished gold medals and faded blue ribbons. The original had been lost long ago, but she could still picture her father, holding the stationary with the pink carnation print, hands shaking as he read the meticulously handwritten words. His eyes glistening, he'd laughed and hugged her.

"Beautiful, sweetheart," he'd said. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

For a while, his words rang true, but, by now, that precious plaque had gathered years' worth of dust. The Delgado Forum, the largest building this close to the Narrows, was all her father cared about.

She inched closer to the wall.

Paranoid much? She rolled her eyes and laughed at herself. Even if she stood in the middle of the street, her father couldn't see her from way up there. And she was waiting for Paul, so it wouldn't matter if he did.

The muffled sound of Metric's *Stadium Love* came from her book bag. Heavy textbooks thunked on the sidewalk as she dropped the bag between her feet and

crouched to unlatch the buckle. Reaching in to fetch her cell, her hand brushed the smallest book and heat skimmed her ears. She should have stopped at home and dropped it off. If anyone saw what she'd been reading

Her fingers touched the cool, metallic edge of her cell. She snatched it out and closed her bag, making sure the strap was tight. The muscles in her thighs clenched as she rose, wobbling a little on her heels. Stilettos took some getting used to. Too bad the comfy sneakers in her bag wouldn't look half as sexy as the thigh-high leather boots she'd chosen to complete her costume for the evening. She wiggled her toes and winced at the sting of a broken blister on the inside of her left foot.

What was it Silver always said? Ah, yes. You wanna look hot? Suffer.

Then again, her little sister had started wearing G-strings in her mid-teens to avoid "gross" panty lines. In her late teens, she'd stopped wearing bras. Oriana didn't ask why – she really didn't want to know. Keeping up with Silver's warped fashion sense would take more free time, and, well, *guts*, than Oriana possessed. For school and special occasions, she wore nice, tailored suits. The rest of the time, she stuck with sweats. A little boring, maybe, but she hated having to constantly fiddle with her clothes and worry about how everything fit.

Looking around to make sure no one was watching, she ran a finger under the tight leather clinging to the flesh of her thigh. A cool breeze skimmed between her legs, reminding her of what else she was wearing. Better not to think too hard about the outfit beneath her white, mid-length wool coat.

She turned her attention to her phone, unwound the wire for her earbuds, then stuck them in her ears. When the highlight reel began, a smile whispered across her lips. The Friday night crowd bustling around her faded away. All she heard was the spectator's roar. All she saw was him.

Even on the small screen, she could make him out. Max Perron, number 40. A close-up of his face after a sweet slap-shot sent tiny wings aflutter in her stomach. Sun-kissed ocean eyes glowed in a wickedly handsome face. Beautiful . . . even more so up close, filled with heat. She hadn't seen them in so long, not in person, not in any way that

mattered, since the day he brought her flowers for her birthday and she'd told him their friendship was a bad idea. She'd ignored every call from him for what seemed like forever. Ignored them until they stopped coming.

A shriek pierced through the sounds blasting in her ears and brought her back to the present. She took out the earbuds.

"Tyler! Oh, I can't believe it's really you!"

The shrill cry came from a young woman dressed in a huge jersey who stepped out of the shadowed alcove halfway down the ramp on the side of the forum. The players came out of there after practices or games and fans would lay in wait to get a glimpse of their heroes. But Oriana had a feeling this girl was more than a fan.

Tyler Vanek, one of the rookies brought up from the farm team the year before, stopped short and leaned an elbow on the brick wall beside the parking garage entrance, trying to look smooth.

"Hey. And you are . . . ?" His lips curved and his cheeks, soft and freshly shaven, glowed under the bare bulb that flashed on overhead. He raked his fingers through his tight, blond curls, and his eyes traveled over the girl as she hopped on her spiky, red heels.

The poise of a man, with the expression of a little boy eager to get his hand in the cookie jar. Maybe he didn't know *who* the girl was, but he'd clearly figured out enough to like his chances.

What did Max call them again? Oh, yeah, Puck Bunnies. Oriana smirked when the girl leapt forward with a little shriek. *Appropriate.*

Vanek braced and caught her before she could knock them both over. "Wow. You're feisty."

Ya think? Oriana stuffed her phone in her book bag and took out her sunglasses. The last dying sunrays had barely crested the city skyline, but she slipped the glasses on anyway. A sidestep up the sidewalk out of their line of sight put her in the perfect position to observe without seeming to. Not because she was into . . . *watching* or anything, but she was curious to see how far it would go.

Most of the players would offer a signature and gently detach themselves. The rookie obviously didn't know better. Bunny's lucky day.

Clinging to his shirt, the blond Jessica-Rabbit-lookalike rubbed one leg up his thigh. "Can we go somewhere?"

"I can't, I gotta get back." Vanek groaned as her hand disappeared between their bodies. "But here's good."

With his back against the wall, he watched her get on her knees.

Oriana let out a huff of disgust and spun away from the pair. Then checked her watch. The spindly silver hands didn't move.

Stupid batteries.

Groans from below set her teeth on edge. Peeking at the lusty pair, she blushed. How could they do *that* out in the open? Loud slurps had passers-by glancing their way and doubling their pace. Vanek's baby face screwed up, and he clenched his hands in the girl's hair as she bobbed her head faster and faster. An old man slowed and took a good long look at the show before giving Oriana a toothless grin.

Cheeks blazing, she crossed her arms over her chest and faced the street. The image of another man getting sucked off by a girl on her knees played like porn on the big screen of her mind. She pressed her eyes shut and tried to force the images out of her head. Vanek's grunts brought them back.

What she'd witnessed in the alley had haunted her for nights after.

You made the right choice. Forget it.

But she couldn't. The way she felt about Max wouldn't go away. She might not want the kind of wild life Max lived, but her heart didn't care. Logic told her there was nothing wrong with the normal, stable life she intended to lead with Paul.

Then she recalled her plans for the evening. Okay, so desperation trumped normal.

Too late for her and Max, but with Paul, maybe, just maybe, she could salvage what they had. If only she weren't the only one fighting for their relationship.

Where are you, Paul?

Tugging a curl loose from her bronze coiffure, she twirled it around her index finger and traced a big, silver hoop earring with her thumb. The scenario played over in her head like it had while she'd carefully picked out each piece of her outfit. Paul, all detached, sitting across from her in the secluded booth she'd paid extra to reserve at his favorite restaurant, looking at his cell every couple minutes. Then she'd take off her coat.

And he'd stare.

The snug, black corset dress she'd finally settled on, knee-length, slit up both sides to the hip, made her feel a little self-conscious, but what she wore underneath made her feel like a goddess. Maybe she should give Paul a preview in the car. He might not want to go out to dinner after all.

Page one of her new . . . *relationship* handbook said a man like Paul needed direction. Needed to be caught off guard.

Men in demanding jobs often feel like they have to be in control at all times. They can't find release in the bedroom because they're wound up so tight. Take their choices away and you'll find you've got a man ready and willing to please. Make him work for it. You'll both enjoy the results.

Could it possibly be that simple?

You're not even wet.

Oriana winced as another memory twinged like a splinter. The way things had gone the last time she and Paul were alone together, she was lucky he'd agreed to meet her at all. Whenever things got intimate, she screwed it up. Their sex life was seriously lacking, the very reason she'd taken the initiative to ask *him* out for once. And called her sister for some advice.

"Look for a book called *Lady in Charge*," Silver had told her. "If that don't work, ditch the loser."

She'd found the book online under "femdom" and decided her little sister was seriously unhinged. Dominate Paul? Really? But then she read the excerpt and decided

to give it a shot. The bondage stuff looked . . . interesting. Picturing silk scarves or lined cuffs securing her wrists – No, *Paul's* wrists to the headboard

Well, couldn't hurt to try. She couldn't very well make things worse.

Thinking of the graphic image on page 214 of a woman attaching a spiked ball stretcher to her lover's sack, she grinned and shook her head. Such extremes right off the bat would definitely make things worse. Better stick with the mild stuff. Like taking charge for the night.

For some reason, the very idea made her feel like she'd taken a big bite of something that smelled sweet and tasted awful. She mentally flipped through the pages she pored over the night before, trying to find a single appealing scene. Maybe a simple role-play?

How would she broach the subject with Paul? 'I want to try something...'

Her stomach did a little flip. Okay, no talking. Just a candlelit dinner, a little reveal of her sexy lingerie, and maybe some moves from the book. Tease him under the table cloth and order him not to come. He'd be putty in her hands. The book said so.

Well, something's gotta work. Oriana made a face and checked her long, black, manicured nails. *According to that same book, the "honeymoon's" over.*

The streetlight overhead flickered to life and a shadow fell, her only warning before a massive form slammed into her. Teetering on her heels, her arms flailed. Her book bag swung out, hit the sidewalk, and skidded off the curb.

Without a word, the man plucked her bag off the street, ignoring the car that swerved to avoid him, horn blaring. He held it out to her.

She hesitated before taking it. The guy was huge, menacing with his face hidden in the shadows of his dark, gray hood. Without getting too close, she snatched the strap. Mouth too dry for a "thank you," she inclined her head and hoped it would be enough.

"Sorry about that." He lowered the hood, revealing a face just as familiar as the voice. His eyes ran over her, paused on her heels, then made their way up slow. "Hey, don't I know you?"

Sloan Callahan. The man she'd seen with Max in the alley – had he seen her? The flap of her jacket hung open, and for a horrible moment, she felt completely exposed. Her mouth went dry, and she had a vision of that night. Only this time, the woman they planned to share wasn't Roxy. It was her.

Her eyes traced the scar from a slash that had almost taken his eye. The bound wooden blade of the stick had torn rather than cut, so the wound wasn't nice and smooth. White flesh streaked in two irregular lines through one brow, over one cheekbone, and up to his temple, creating a well-defined path.

Those who'd voted Callahan the most handsome man in the sport for three years straight – as if good looks made a damn bit of difference on the ice – considered the damage done to Callahan's face a tragedy. To her mind, the scars gave him a dangerous appeal. The kind of appeal that tempted good girls to do very bad things.

"Do I?"

Definitely. Oriana blinked. Did he know she was thinking about him and Max and . . . ? She shook her head. *Don't be a dumb ass. He asked if he knew you.*

Taking hold of the flaps of her jacket, she held it closed and craned her neck to study him over her sunglasses. "No. I don't think so." His dark eyes narrowed, and she swallowed. A moan from the ramp spurred her on. She pushed her sunglasses up with a finger and spoke loud so Vanek's captain wouldn't hear him. "Umm . . . I don't suppose you have the time?"

A crowd of teens approached, taking up most of the sidewalk. Rather than move across the sidewalk to let them pass, he stepped towards her. She retreated until her back hit a light post. His hand under her elbow kept her from toppling onto the street.

"It's eight-twenty, princess." He leaned his forearm on the post above her head and chuckled when she froze. "You waiting for someone?"

All she could do was nod as she peered up at him with wide eyes. Damn he was tall. And big. And hot.

More scary than anything. Should check him for weapons. Boy's dangerous.

Cold air skimmed over her breasts, causing goosebumps to rise on all the flesh not covered by the tightly-laced bodice. She wanted to do up her jacket, but he was too close. If she didn't move, he might not notice the slit of the dress had slipped to one side, exposing her thigh to hip.

You sure you don't want him to notice? said the naughty voice in her head, which usually indicated she had been spending too much time on the phone listening to her sister's raunchy tales.

She peeked up at Callahan, and heat flooded her cheeks when she caught his eyes on her breasts.

"Well, let's hope he's not too late. Someone might steal you away." Tiny creases cut through his scar, and something stirred deep inside. The way he looked at her almost made her feel desirable. He leaned a little closer. "I mean, dressed like that, standing on the corner"

He pushed away from her.

"How dare —" She sputtered on the words she wanted to say and let her narrowed gaze spit all the venom her mouth couldn't. Might be better for him if he *did* have a knife on him. She was very tempted to see what kind of damage she could do with her nails.

But acting like a savage wasn't her style. She gave him the coldest look she could muster and glanced up the sidewalk to see if she could catch the eye of someone passing by. Just in case he went caveman on her. Not that he looked even close to doing so. His composure brought her to the edge of losing hers entirely.

A sparkle of amusement lit his black eyes, and he gave her legs another lingering look. "Hell, with those legs, I'm sure you'd get a decent offer. I'd make one myself, but I'm in too much of a hurry for you to make it worth my while." He winked and tugged his hood back over his head. "Maybe next time."

A little sting in the corner of her eye made her blink fast and shake her head. *Sticks and stones, Oriana. How would Silver handle this?*

Hands on her hips, she gave him a swift once over and sucked her teeth. "Callahan —
"

"You can call me, 'Mr. Callahan.' We're not friends."

"Fine, Mr. Callahan." She clipped out each syllable, resisting the urge to kick him.

"There won't be a next time."

Real smooth. Do you need Silver to script a decent comeback?

"So you say." Callahan cleared his throat. "Vanek, I'm heading in. You have two minutes."

The sharp sound of a zipper drew her attention to the ramp. Vanek gave her a sheepish grin, then nodded at his bunny while she scribbled something on a scrap of paper and stuffed it in his pocket. The bunny's heels clicked as she made her way up the ramp. Blonde waves bouncing, she disappeared around the corner.

"Nice try covering for the kid. I'm sure he'd thank you if he got her knocked up and she took him for all he's worth." Callahan took her sunglasses from her face and slipped them into her jacket pocket, effectively removing her only shield. "Did you enjoy the show?"

So much for hoping he'd forgotten. She glared at the gold embroidered team logo centered on his broad chest. A snake, just like him.

His finger brushed her cheek as he tucked a loose curl behind her ear. Her pulse sped up. Her gaze shot to his face. Those black eyes didn't belong to a snake. Or any animal she'd ever seen. They brought to mind the ocean at night when the surface was smooth and calm. And just cool enough to be soothing after a hot summer day. She could imagine immersing herself in the water, feeling soft waves lap up her thighs. Soon the moonlight would reflect off the glassy surface, like the streetlights reflected in Callahan's eyes.

The ocean always mesmerized her.

"Tell me, princess, did it get you off?"

But the ocean didn't have a big, stupid mouth.

Her chin jutted up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't." He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "So soft. I can imagine you in that position" When she jerked away, he laughed. "But you don't know what I'm talking about."

Oh, god. She watched him turn away, unable to force her eyes off him until he disappeared inside the forum. Her mind locked on "the position" he'd implied. The bunny's position? Or the position of the woman he'd shared with Max? Neither option seemed as deplorable as it should have. Or likely to happen.

So not fair. The only man in history to reject Silver, hitting on *her*.

No, *mocking* her. He couldn't seriously think she'd ever

Her nipples drew into hard little points and poked through the openwork details of her lace bra. Her body wasn't in accord with her mind. Then again, the intelligent arguments her brain came up with were weak.

Sex in public isn't my thing.

Not that she knew what her "thing" was.

Couldn't you consider trying something new? For Max?

She should have, but it was too late.

Is it?

Neither her brain nor her body had an answer. She hadn't spoken to Max in months. Maybe she should call him and apologize for the way she'd behaved. Maybe then they could discuss . . .

Get a grip. You have a man.

Who was an hour late. So much for their dinner reservations.

Heaving out a sigh, she smoothed her hands over her sides to make sure the dress hadn't inched up to reveal more of the *generous* thighs Sloan had admired. Then did up her jacket. The way things were going, he might be the only one who got to see them tonight.

Change direction of thoughts. Sloan isn't interested in my pudgy legs. I'm trying to impress Paul. Who'll be here

The door of the forum slid open. Her father's secretary walked out.

"Hi, Annie." Oriana stepped into the pinched-nosed woman's path. "Is Paul –?"

Annie looked over the red rim of her spectacles and sniffed. "He'll be along shortly. Excuse me."

The secretary hurried to her bus stop. Her behavior might have seemed rude to some, but it didn't bother Oriana. Her father kept Annie busy. She had to get home to her kids.

Never mind that she would have found time to talk if Silver stood in her place. Because Silver wouldn't be standing here, waiting. No one kept Silver waiting for anything.

Then again, Silver wouldn't let them if they tried. Her little sister would have stormed into Daddy's office after ten minutes of sitting in the limo – not standing on the curb because the limo driver wouldn't dare tell *her* he had other places to be – and ranted until both the man of the hour and Daddy were tripping over each other making apologies.

Oriana couldn't do that.

A couple strolled by with steaming cups of coffee. The aroma lingered in the crisp, maritime breeze, fragrant tendrils of temptation, coming from the couple as much as the cups. A little cafe around the corner ground their coffee beans fresh for each pot right in front of the customers. The whole place smelled so earthy and rich, the caffeinated kick struck the second the door cracked open. Still her favorite haunt before and after exams, even though Max never

Stop.

Coffee. Coffee would be lovely. A new plan formed and she smiled.

Maybe she couldn't do ranting. But she *could* do thoughtful.

Fifteen minutes later, cardboard tray in hand, Oriana strolled into the Forum and made a beeline for the elevator. The echo of her heels on the glistening, black granite floors sounded like the tick of a giant clock. High rounded arches and marble columns gave the appearance of a cathedral; the huge black and white portraits of hockey greats, like Gordie Howe, suspended from the pristine white ceiling looked like saints of old.

Without crowds it didn't seem like a place to enjoy rowdy sports. The last couple of times she'd met Paul here, she'd had to stop herself from looking for pews.

Eight months in Dartmouth and I still haven't been to a single game. Her steps slowed as she passed the big, red double doors that led to the stands. School work kept her busy, so she'd never questioned Paul and her father's refusal to let her watch the games from the press box.

Well, no one could stop her from buying a ticket. Then she could enjoy the full experience without Paul or her father spoiling her fun by telling her not to shout at the players. Imagining a treat of beer and nachos, she inhaled deeply, then wrinkled her nose at the sharp scent of lemon cleaner hanging in the air from a recently passed mop. Nope, fantasy just wouldn't cut it. Whether the men in her life liked it or not, she was going to the hockey game tomorrow night.

Movement to the far left quickened her pace.

The night guard pushed to his feet. "You can't be in here."

Her heels skidded on the wet floor, and her best imitation of Silver's haughty look froze on her face. The coffee tray went up.

She went down.

An arm hooked around her waist, and the coffee tray was swooped out of her hand. "Careful."

A flash of white teeth broke through the warm brown of the face above her. Bulging muscles flexed under her shoulders. Hard abs rippled under her hand. The feeling of falling intensified, and the room spun as blood rushed from her head to her core.

Oh god! Whatever you want to do to me, the answer is yes!

Time to get her libido on a freaking leash. Maybe the granite cracking her skull would save her from embarrassing herself any further. She had the strangest urge to wrap her arms around his neck and press her body flush against his. Instead, she did her best to curve away from him.

Tray balanced on one big hand, the man set her on her feet. "That would have been a nasty spill."

The room leveled out. Black and gold filled her vision. Another freakin' King Cobra jersey. Her eyes traveled up and locked on big, pouty lips, a shade darker than his skin, outlined by a trim black goatee.

There was only one black player on the King Cobra's roster. Dominik Mason. She'd watched a few of his interviews and knew he was the tough guy of the team, their enforcer. His smile usually meant someone would get hurt. A lot of people were scared of him.

But how could a man look scary with lips like that?

She blinked when the edges of his lips twitched and cleared her throat. "Um, thank you"

He chuckled and handed her the tray. "Dominik Mason at your service, ma'am."

The way he said 'service' made all the tiny hairs on her flesh rise. Deep as cavern wind, with a hint of hidden danger, his voice made her tremble, and she wouldn't pretend it was with fear. He wouldn't have to talk dirty to get a girl worked up. He could just say her name.

Did he know her name?

Enough! What the hell is wrong with you?

That book had messed with her head. Time to find Paul before she threw herself at the next guy who smiled at her.

Yeah, 'cause you're acting just like that bunny. Pathetic.

Oriana met his warm, brown eyes and pulled on the poise she used with the press. A mask that never fit quite right but tended to serve the purpose of redirecting questions to her father or Paul with a nod and a smile. "Thank you, Mason." She inhaled and gave him a stiff smile. "I really should get going"

"As I said." The guard approached them, a scowl bunching the wrinkles on his face. "You can't be in here. We're closed to the public."

Mason crossed his arms and glanced at the little man. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes, but —"

"This is Oriana Delgado." Mason jerked his chin at her. "I don't think she qualifies as 'the public.'"

He does know my name.

The guard's scowl melted away. He still didn't recognize her – no surprise there – but he wouldn't question Mason. "Sorry, ma'am." He tipped his hat and returned to his desk.

"Going up?" Mason pressed the button to the elevator at her nod.

Holding the tray with one hand, she used the other to adjust the strap of her book bag. "Are you?"

Please say no. Being alone with him in an elevator wouldn't be good. The hint of something spicy on his breath made her mouth water. Six floors up would be plenty of time for a taste.

You're projecting Silver again, Oriana. Stop before you do something stupid.

His lips curved like he'd caught the thought. "No. Unfortunately I've got a team meeting to get to. How about after . . . ?"

"I've got a date with my boyfriend."

"You're still with *him*?"

Could he sound any more disgusted? Of course, it wasn't exactly a secret that the players weren't fond of their coach. He was from Toronto, and a good half of the King Cobras were from Montreal. There was bound to be some animosity.

That's what she told herself anyway. Wouldn't be loyal to admit her boyfriend was an asshole.

And the white picket fence you're dreaming of might start looking more like a cage.

"Yeah. It's been eight months." She shifted the tray so the hot parts weren't touching her skin. "It was really nice to meet you though."

"My pleasure, Oriana." He took her hand, gave it a little squeeze before retreating. "Don't let anyone give you grief about being here. Okay?"

The elevator door skidded open. She stepped inside. "Okay."

When the elevator doors clicked shut, she let out a breathy laugh. Keeping Delgado's daughter happy was part of the job. Just not *this* daughter. Good thing neither Mason nor the guard knew better. Or the guard wouldn't have let her in. And Mason would have ignored her, just like everyone did.

Self-pity now? You're on a roll.

The elevator dinged.

"Put him on injury reserve. I don't care if it means he can't play for the rest of the season, we need to bring up a new forward." Her father backed onto the elevator, the diamonds in his gold cufflinks flashing as he made a sharp motion with his hand in the assistant coach's face to cut him off and directed his next words at the general manager. "We're on a losing streak! We won't sell any seats if we don't get a win."

Oriana ducked to avoid getting smacked by the last excited gesture. Her father hadn't noticed her yet. And in this mood, she'd rather he not.

"We don't have the cap for another player of Callahan's caliber." Dean Richter, the GM, a man whose demeanor brought on the urge to salute, stopped the door with his shoulder and spared Oriana a dismissive glance. "However, we have a couple of draft picks—including the one we've been using—that might be suitable. I'll look into it."

When her father nodded, the GM stepped back and the door slid shut.

Case closed. But apparently Tim Rowe, the assistant coach, didn't see it that way.

"Sir, we have to consider the playoffs. And it was just an upper body injury." Rowe hooked his finger to the collar of his starched white shirt and loosened his tie. A muscle in his jaw ticked, belying the calm in his eyes. "We can't keep him on IR—the doctor cleared him to play. Give him a few games and he'll be—"

The olive shade of her father's faintly lined face turned blotchy red. "The playoffs mean shit out here when it comes to the bottom line, Tim. No one expects this team to make it that far! Fans come to the games expecting to see some action. Big hits, fights, and scoring!"

"Callahan is capable of giving you all that," Rowe said. "And he's a fan favorite."

"He *was* a fan favorite. Don't you fucking shake your head at me!" The veins in her father's temples darkened to a frightening shade of purple. "That's why Paul is the head coach! He gets that this is a business!"

She really, really didn't want to draw his attention, but she figured she'd better before he had a stroke. "Where *is* Paul, Dad?"

Her father spun towards her and scowled. "What are *you* doing here?"

Rowe opened his mouth. Before he could insert his foot by defending her, she answered. "I figured – since your meeting was taking so long – that I'd bring you guys some coffee. Me and Paul were supposed to go out for dinner, but –"

"The team was called in for extra practice," her father said. "You might as well go home."

"I just saw a couple of the guys taking a break – is Paul down at the rink already?"

"He's still in his office." Rowe met her father's glare with a shrug. "She deserves to know."

"Know what?" Oriana shifted the tray to one hand and touched Rowe's arm. "Is Paul okay?"

"He's fine." Her father cleared his throat. "He's heading down to the rink soon, but –"

The elevator dinged again. Her stop. "Well, I'll just drop this off with him and leave. I won't keep him, I promise."

"Oriana, he's busy!"

Not too busy to explain why he didn't have the decency to call and cancel their date. She strode across the hall, fingers denting the cardboard tray.

Rowe hastened to catch up with her. "Oriana, I should tell you . . . you don't want to –"

Third door on the left. She turned the handle.

Wet, rhythmic slapping came through the slit of the door. She swung it wide. Paul *was* busy. With Chantelle, the director of media relations. On top of his desk, working *real* hard.

The tray slipped from her hands as her grip went slack.

Chapter Two

The tops burst off the cups. Coffee splashed Oriana's legs. Pain sizzled up her thighs but didn't quite register. Her skin seemed to belong to someone else. Someone far away.

Slender thighs spread wide. Paul's face screwed up as he thrust hard, obviously experiencing more pleasure than he ever had with her

A shout crossed the distance. "Hey!"

Tears blurred the bright lights of the hall. She blinked them away and swallowed against the bile in her throat. Her nails dug into her palms, and the sharp pain countered the numbness taking over.

Breathe. You don't care. Doesn't matter. You really don't care.

But she did. She'd cared enough to change everything for him. All for nothing.

The pages in that damn book she'd considered the salvation of her relationship flapped in her mind like a gust of wind had taken hold of them. The images mocked her — a powerful woman being worshiped by a man on his knees. Paul could never be that man. Never mind worship. Love and loyalty were too much to ask.

Someone touched her arm and she twisted away. "Don't!"

Paul swiped at the wet hair stuck to his brow and wrapped one hand around Oriana's wrist, trying to hold her in place while using the other to do up his pants. He let her go when his zipper stuck. "Stop it. I can explain."

"Can you?" She evaded his grab for her and stumbled out of his reach. "Let me guess. It's not what I think."

"It's exactly what you think. I have needs. You can't fulfill them." He folded his arms over his chest, lips drawn in a thin line. "We're good in every other way. I deal with all your flaws. Cut me some slack."

Did he really think so little of her? She bit the tip of her tongue and took a deep breath. "What flaws, Paul? What could I have possibly done to deserve this?"

"Look at you!" He gestured at her boots. "You're fucking clueless. Either it's baggy jogging pants to cover up the flab you're too lazy to work off or some ridiculous outfit

that makes you look like you're playing dress up. What the hell are you wearing anyway?" He reached out to take hold of her jacket.

Not the first time he'd implied she was fat, but it would be the last. She let her book bag slip off her shoulder and swung it at him. He sidestepped, caught the strap, and tore the bag from her hand. The buckle snapped, and her books flew out and skidded across the floor. *Lady in Charge* thumped into the wall beside Rowe, and Oriana's eyes went wide as he glanced down.

Rowe's brow twitched, but his expression was unreadable. He covered the book with his foot and smoothly slid it out of sight. Then he cleared his throat. "I think—"

Oriana's father held up his hand. "No one cares what you think. Paul, why don't you and Oriana go home and talk this over. Tim can manage the team for the night."

"No." Oriana forced her eyes away from the book under Rowe's shoe and turned to Paul. "It's over."

Paul arched a brow and looked past her to her father. "I won't have my partners invest another cent in the team if she won't be reasonable."

You think that's unreasonable? She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut when her father dropped a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"She will." Oriana stared at her father, and he shook his head. "She knows what she stands to lose."

With a curt nod, Paul disappeared into his office.

Her father eased the door shut. "Oriana, you have to understand--"

"I do not." She sucked air through her teeth, her whole body shaking as she tried to take in the utter betrayal of this man who called himself her father. He'd known about Paul and Chantelle, and, rather than tell her, he'd tried to cover for Paul. "How long has this been going on?"

"It doesn't matter. If you'd been keeping him satisfied, he wouldn't have looked elsewhere." Her father's cold, flint-colored eyes snapped. "You just got a hard dose of reality. It's about time. I've seen you mooning after the players. Is Paul just supposed to accept that?"

"I never cheated on him!"

"But you made it clear he wasn't enough." He straightened the lapels of his designer suit. "If I had the slightest inclination you were playing games, I would have discouraged Paul from pursuing you. It's too late. He's a savvy business man, and he's used to getting what he wants. And, for *some* reason, he wants you."

"Tough." Something inside ached to scream at him, to demand to know when she'd stopped being his daughter and started being a commodity. But she didn't have the heart for it. "He can't have me anymore. We're through."

"Oh, really?" She jumped at her father's laugh. "Paul won't just let you go. You'll inherit a fortune if you don't screw this up." He leaned over her. "If you break up with him, I'll cut you off. Let's see you get your bachelor's without a dime to your name."

Her bottom lip quivered. She covered her mouth with her hand. "You wouldn't . . ."

His glare crushed the last of her pathetic delusions. They both knew he'd follow through with his threat. Losing the backing of Paul's business partners would cost her father more than she was worth. Reality lodged in her throat, hard enough to choke on. Her shoulders slumped and she gave a quick nod.

"Good, you *do* understand." His lips curled as he looked her over one last time. "Now go home and take off those ridiculous boots. I won't have my daughter walking around looking like a whore."

When her father disappeared into his office, Oriana stared down the empty hall, eyes burning with unshed tears. A ruffle of fabric at her side reminded her she was not alone.

Muttering something under his breath, Rowe handed her the silver kerchief from his suit pocket.

Oriana took it and dabbed blindly at a stain on the hem of her jacket. Her skin stung where the wool grazed her thigh so she lifted the material to check the reddened flesh. Only a first-degree burn, nothing serious. Cold water, a bit of ointment, and she'd be fine.

Why did those words always sound so reassuring while volunteering at the clinic? Give the toddler a lollipop and the booboo's all better.

A sweet treat wouldn't do her any good. Pain was the least of her problems.

"I'm trapped." She felt for a wall to lean against, needing something solid behind her while her world crumbled. "I have to stay with him. Never mind my bachelor's. How the hell am I gonna pay for medical school?"

"I'm sure you'll figure something out." Rowe bent down and gathered her books, not looking up as he stuffed them in her ruined bag. "You're not the type to just lie down and accept defeat."

With a shaky, slightly incredulous smile on her lips, she shook her head. What a sweet guy. A little naive, but sweet. "What gives you that idea?"

Setting her bag on the floor between them, Rowe straightened. The bright pink cover of *Lady in Charge* glistened under the hall light as he held it up. He gave her a hard look. "This doesn't seem like the type of book a girl who lets her daddy run her life would read."

You're giving me way too much credit. Cheeks blazing, Oriana held out her hand. "Give me my book . . . please."

The stiff spine of the book cracked as Rowe opened it and turned away from her. "Hmm, nice graphics. Have you tried this one?" He held the book out to show her the image of a woman "pegging" a man. "If it got out that Paul let someone —"

Oriana grabbed the book, then her bag, and crammed it inside. "No, I've never tried any of it. I planned a special night with Paul, and I thought — anyway, it doesn't matter. If I try blackmailing either Paul or my father, they'll laugh in my face. I'm not Silver. Pissing *her* off means bad press."

"I'm sure you could stir up some bad press too."

He *really* didn't know her. The very idea of bringing that kind of attention to herself made her nauseous. But damn, having someone give a shit was nice.

You have someone — he's a phone call away.

True, yet, she didn't deserve help from *him*. Or Rowe for that matter, but she hadn't done anything to hurt Rowe. And she wasn't too proud to accept a bit of pity.

"Maybe I could, but they know I won't." Hugging her bag to her chest, she glanced up at him – man, why did everyone in this sport have to be so freakin' tall? – and ducked her head when he frowned at her. "Besides, if I do, my father will lose the team, and you'll be out of a job."

Rowe rubbed his shoulder and leaned forward, speaking low. "Your father will lose this team within the next couple of years whether Paul backs him or not, Oriana. I've been approached by several other teams for a head coach position. I'll be fine." He flicked a strand of hair off her shoulder and shook his head. "The question is, will you?"

Would she? No, not if she had to stay with Paul. And not if she had to give up the future she'd worked so hard for. She chewed on the inside of her cheek and shook her head.

"All right, then we need to focus on making sure your father doesn't cut you off before you can pay for school yourself."

Makes sense. She followed him towards the elevator, hands stuffed in her jacket pockets, and she weighed her few options. "I guess . . . I won't break up with Paul, at least until –"

He glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. "Forget Paul. He's not important."

"But –"

"Quiet." He grinned at Oriana's huff. "Let me think for a minute."

They passed her father's office. He hadn't closed the door, so she took a moment to watch him, standing in the middle of the room, staring at a portrait on the wall. Antoine's portrait, taken days after he'd been drafted for the minors. Weeks before he died. She did math in her head. Fifteen years, in two days. No wonder he seemed so cold. He always got that way while he mourned his only son.

Oriana gave up reminding him *she* was still alive when her father acquired the team and the Forum. An abstract way to keep the dreams of his firstborn alive meant more to him than his living flesh and blood. Besides, Silver acted out enough for both of them.

But she couldn't let her father ruin her life in her dead brother's name. So how did she fix this?

Rowe waved her over, and she approached him, stepping carefully so her heels wouldn't click on the tiles.

"You know, with the right . . . evidence, you might not need to do anything public," he said. "The threat might be enough."

Oriana glanced at the open office door and kept her tone low. "What do you suggest?"

"Get creative, do something neither Paul nor your father would expect from you. Stop trying to be the perfect daughter." He pressed the call button for the elevator. "Your father was right about one thing. Paul clearly wasn't enough for you — 'course, that's not your fault."

What's that supposed to mean? "I"

"Have you seen Max lately?"

Little creases formed around his eyes when she bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

"You should. He talks about you a lot. To T.J. and Vanek." His brow lifted when her lips curved. "Dominik."

She swallowed.

He cocked his head slightly. "Sloan."

Ugh. She scraped her lip with her teeth and wrinkled her nose. She did not like the idea of Sloan and Max discussing her. What could they possibly have to say?

'Remember the time she caught us'

Feeling Rowe's gaze on her face, she ripped her attention from the imagined conversation and focused on the present one.

"Have you ever experimented . . . sexually? With anyone?"

"Rowe!" She covered her mouth with her hand and glanced down the hall. Talking sex with Silver was weird enough, but with Rowe? She didn't want to go there. This all reminded her of sex-ed in high school. *No, I'm not . . . doing it. Yes, I know about being safe.*

"Call me Tim." Suddenly he was very close, looming over her, and she couldn't look away. "Answer me, Oriana."

"No. Sex has always been" She frowned. Why was she telling him? Why didn't she want to stop? "Boring."

"I've always liked your honesty." His broad smile of approval reminded her of her Uncle Wayne. Her chest tightened as his face, weather-worn and full of laugh lines, filled her mind's eye. He'd become her surrogate father after her brother died, attended all her school functions, never missed a performance of her high school orchestra. He'd go on and on about her talent, tell anyone who'd listen how well she played violin.

After he died, she stopped playing. She just didn't see the point anymore; she didn't impress anyone else. Not that anyone noticed *anything* she did.

"Hey, don't let them get to you, kid." Rowe — *no, Tim* — held out his hand. "Come on."

Oriana reached out, but pulled back when her fingertips brushed his palm. "Where are we going?"

The elevator chimed and the door slid open.

"Down to the rink. I thought you wanted my help." Tim placed his hands behind his back, and his lips curved into a Cheshire cat smile.

That couldn't mean anything good. Oriana watched Tim turn away from her and step onto the elevator like he couldn't care less whether she followed or not. Which reminded her of Silver. She'd completely forgotten Tim and Silver had been close before he met his wife.

Kindred spirits. She took a deep breath and joined him on the elevator just in time to avoid the doors closing on her.

"What kind of help are we talking about?"

* * * *

The scrape of blades on ice echoed off the rink along with the odd shout from the trainers. Oriana followed Tim to the suicide box — the space between the benches for

camera men to take shots from ice level – and for a moment simply absorbed the sensation of actually being this close to the action. The air smelled like freshly fallen snow, moist with a nip of cold.

"You've never been here before, have you?" Tim put his hand on her shoulder, and she jumped. He laughed. "Hey, why so wound up? You're acting like I just snuck you into the teacher's lounge."

She gave him a sheepish grin and shrugged. That was exactly how she felt. Like she was out-of-bounds.

"Why are we here?"

"I thought you'd enjoy seeing the guys up close and personal." Tim jerked his chin in the direction of the rink.

One look and everything around her faded away. Her mouth went dry, and she swallowed spastically.

Max.

Completely oblivious to her presence, Max cut across the ice in a burst of speed, his blades a silver blur. Stopping short, he hip-checked one of his teammates, laughing his rich, skin-tingling laugh when the man shouted at him. Gliding backwards, he made a come-get-me motion with his gloved hand.

Oriana rested her hands on the top of the boards, grip tight on the cold edge so she wouldn't hop over and run to him. Her heart beat hard against the cage of her ribs. She licked her lips as she imagined how he'd react if she gave in to the crazy urge. Would he be embarrassed?

No, not Max. He'd probably laugh and race over to save her from killing herself on her stupid boots. He would act like no time had passed because that was the kind of man he was. Everything would be forgiven. Forgotten. She envisioned him swooping her up into his arms. Then reason crept in. She didn't want to get him in trouble.

But she could see him after. And when she did, she would tell him how wrong she'd been. She smiled. *Maybe he'll let me make it up to him.*

"That's better." Tim gave her a little nudge, then leaned his forearms on top of the boards beside her. "Now, I have a very important question for you."

Tearing her eyes away from Max, Oriana looked up at Tim. "Yes?"

"How far are you willing to go to get the evidence you need?"

Good question. Oriana considered the lengths Silver had gone to when their father told her, in no uncertain terms, that she wouldn't be going to Hollywood to pursue an acting career. For months afterward, pictures of Silver filled the tabloids, pictures of her with different men, going into fetish clubs, coming out wearing half of what she'd gone in with. When big investors threatened to withdraw their support, her father not only agreed to let Silver go, he'd also paid all her expenses and gotten in touch with one of his contacts in the film industry to get Silver an audition.

A little too much for Oriana. She couldn't imagine doing something so extroverted.

She opened her mouth to tell Tim as much. Then the sound of a puck pinging off a goalpost, followed by a loud "Fuck!", brought her attention back to the rink.

"Try again, Callahan," one of the trainers called out.

Standing on the blue line, Callahan nodded and accepted a pass from the trainer. He glared at the empty net. Oriana held her breath as swung his stick, then slapped the puck with the stick blade. The puck zipped through the air in a black blur, too fast to follow. Another *ping*. The rink went quiet.

Callahan threw his stick towards the net and headed for the open zamboni entrance. Oriana winced when he kicked the wall on his way out.

Someone cleared his throat behind her. "What are you doing here? You were told to go home."

Oriana's spine stiffened. She glanced over her shoulder at Paul. And Chantelle.

"I—"

"Came to see Max? I'm not surprised." Paul exchanged a look with Chantelle, then they both looked at Oriana like she was a pathetic little girl with a crush. "Go ahead, throw yourself at him. He'll use you like he does all the other girls. Maybe then you'll appreciate what you have with me."

Wow. Oriana gaped after Paul as he drew Chantelle out of the box, whispering in her ear and kissing her neck. He obviously didn't feel like he needed to hide his affair anymore. That he'd gone so far as to tell her to go ahead and sleep with another man showed her just how confident he was that she wouldn't find a way to be free of him.

Tim rubbed her arm. "I'm sorry, sweetie. We'll figure out—"

Oriana grabbed his wrist. "You asked how far I'd go?" She ground her teeth and studied the men on the ice. Then she gave a curt nod and gulped at the sick feeling in her throat. "How's this. I'll do whatever it takes."

Chapter Three

The last of the men emptied out of the locker room, more subdued than Sloan had ever seen them. Friday night practice usually ended with the men converging to the closest bar for some down time. An excess of beer and women, then they'd all go home and crash.

But not tonight.

Fist pressed into the bench beneath him, Sloan took a deep, deep breath, fighting the urge to put a hole in the wall and risk breaking his hand again. One game without a goal and they were sending him to the freakin' farm team?

This had to be some kind of sick joke. With his stats, they couldn't seriously think they'd do better without him. Could they?

"You're not as . . . resilient as you used to be, Callahan." The trainer made a face as though he could taste the bullshit smeared all over his words. "The center they brought up has the spunk the team needs."

In other words, the kid would rack up penalty minutes by getting in a fight every game and creaming the other team's players against the boards in the dirtiest, showiest way possible.

Sloan had tried to live up to the violent image the King Cobras' owner wanted to portray, going so far as to throw down his gloves during a game midseason and call out the biggest guy on the ice. The crowd loved it. Coach Stanton loved it.

Too bad he'd broken his hand on the guy's helmet. He might have won the fight, but, in the two months he'd been gone, the new kid had won several. The fans had a new hero.

"It's just for the last month of the season. We both know the team's not going any further." The trainer said, as though he'd caught the gist of Sloan's thoughts.

And that was supposed to make him feel better? "I'm being sent down for reconditioning. It's humiliating. And they still expect me to play tomorrow?"

The trainer had the grace to look away. "I think they expect you to prove they're making the right decision. After tonight, I don't think you're ready to prove them wrong. Your stick handling is off."

Sloan slouched and rubbed his face with his hands. For fuck's sake, he'd been with the team for five years. Hadn't he earned more than two games to get back in the rhythm?

Before Delgado, definitely. But ever since the bastard took complete control of the team and the forum the year before, integrity meant fuck-all.

"Thanks for giving me a heads up, Randy," Sloan said, head down. "Stanton would have blindsided me."

Randy didn't comment. He shuffled out and left Sloan to change.

The door hit the wall. Two of his men stormed in.

"What the hell's going on?" one player pretty much roared. "Randy looks like he just downed a burger covered in maggots."

Brow arched, Sloan glanced at the team's top offensive-defenseman-slash-enforcer, Dominik Mason. White teeth bared, lips curled, the man reminded him of a big black bear with burrs in his fur. Took quite a bit to agitate Mason, so he must have some idea of what was going on.

Snapping up the towel he'd abandoned on the bench when he'd been sidetracked after his shower, Sloan rubbed his hair until the short onyx strands puffed up. He used his fingers to tame them. "I'm being sent down to the minors after the next game. Don't say nothing. It was decent of Randy to let me know."

"You've got to be kidding." T.J., the team's oldest and biggest defenseman, thirty-seven and a daunting six-foot-nine, folded his arms and leaned on the lockers, making them creak. "You're the best player we've got."

"I'm not productive enough for Delgado."

The door opened again. Sloan tossed the towel in the general direction of the biggest pile on the floor, then propped his hands behind him on the bench to watch the team's finest gather, all bristling at the injustice while Mason shared the news.

"You should have gotten an assist on my goal Wednesday."

"This is bullshit."

Vanek, the left winger, and his best friend Perron, another defenseman. Sloan grinned. They were a loyal bunch.

"Nothing we can do about it guys." Sloan slapped his thighs and stood. "Let's just enjoy our last game together."

Perron eyed the sleek, black cell phone in his hand and gave a curt nod before stuffing it in the pocket of his baggy, gray jogging pants. "Or we can figure out a way to keep you on the roster."

Pulse quickening, Sloan sat back down and schooled his features. He didn't want to look too excited, but they didn't call Perron "The Catalyst" for nothing. "Tell me what you've got."

* * * *

Max left the men in the player's lounge and approached the bathroom across the hall. He knew his vague "Trust me" hadn't satisfied Sloan, but that was the best he could offer until he made sure his plan worked for everyone involved. He reached out to push the door open and noticed his hand shaking like he had pregame jitters.

He clenched his fist and knocked. "You in there, sugar?"

No answer. Well, hell, he shouldn't be surprised. Even if Tim was right and she needed his help, that didn't mean she'd accept it. Her reasons for rejecting his friendship – for rejecting *him* – hadn't changed. He still saw the flowers she'd left to die on the passenger seat of his pickup that night, on her birthday, when he'd told her he loved her.

You went too far. You had no right.

But things had changed.

"Look, Tim called me and" He rested his forehead on the back of his fist. "I'm . . . I'm here if you need me, Oriana."

The door opened a crack. Oriana peeked out at him, eyes rimmed with tears. "That's what you said when I stopped being your friend."

Shit. She likely thinks I'm going to rub it in. He pinched the tense flesh between his eyes and eased the door open. "I was pissed off when I said it, but I meant every word — " *Every word? Including 'have a nice life' and all the crap after?* "I mean — "

"I know what you mean."

Her arms crossed under breasts which seemed dangerously close to spilling right over the top of her corset-style bodice. For a second, he wondered how she could breathe with the laces done up so tight, but then he forced his gaze to where her nails dug into her bare arms. Then up to her face.

Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. Her lips trembled.

"Come here," he said, holding out his hand. Deep inside, part of him braced for rejection the way he'd brace for a solid check into the boards. But he knew on the outside he looked calm. In control.

She sobbed, put her hand in his, then threw herself into his arms. "I'm sorry. You were right. You were right and I was so stupid — "

"None of that, love." Face buried in her hair, he closed his eyes and absorbed her scent, her warmth, grateful for the chance to be close to her again. Maybe not for long, but he'd take what he could get. "We both know why you were with Paul. The important thing now is gettin' him out of your life."

"Yes." She sniffed and looked up. "Then we can — "

"One thing at a time." He tapped her nose and smiled so she wouldn't take him cutting her off too hard. Much as he wanted to, he couldn't let her finish that sentence. She'd end up offering something she'd regret. "Tim said you were willing to do *anything* to make your dad and Paul back off. Did you mean that?"

Her tiny nose wrinkled and her nostrils flared. "Definitely. Why, do you have an idea?"

"I might." But she wouldn't like it. Fuck, he wished he could come up with something else — *anything* else. Instead, he had to use the one thing that would remind her of why

she'd ditched him in the first place. "What would you think of involving the other guys?"

The look on her face was priceless. Lips parted, cheeks cherry red, she stared at him like he'd just asked her to strip and strut around the forum naked. His lips quirked. The next part of his plan was almost as bad.

"The other guys?" Her voice squeaked and she turned even redder. "How many of them?"

Hell, she thinks I mean the whole team! "Just four. My line and two defenseman."

"Ah." She rubbed her bare arms, then covered her cleavage with her hand. "And what exactly do I do with them all?"

"You don't have to do anything." He reached out and curved his hand under her jaw, angling her face up so she could see the camera in the hall right between the locker-room and the bathroom. "We'll just make it look like you did."

Her hand slid up to her throat. "Oh."

Oh? Frowning, he studied her face. She blinked at him and pulled away.

Very strange. She seemed nervous, but Mason always said dilated pupils combined with rapid blinking and — he watched her tongue dart over her bottom lip — *that*, were signs of arousal. His blood surged downward and his palms got damp. He'd been worried about scaring her, but his suggestion seemed to have had a very different effect.

The metallic heels of her boots clicked as she walked across the room, watching him through the mirror. "So you think evidence that I'm . . . fooling around with the team . . . you think that will be enough?"

"I don't know — Paul's got some pride, I don't see him wanting to be associated with something like that, but this is more about your father." He paused, meeting her eyes in the reflection. "I have a reputation, Oriana. There are a lot of rumors about me sharing women. If I bring the guys in here, and then walk out with you half naked —"

All the color left her face. "Half naked? You want me to walk out of here —"

He quickly stepped up behind her to hug her before she got all upset for nothing. "In a jersey or somethin', I know you're not into exhibitionism."

"Max." She squirmed in his arms until she was facing him. Her fingers hooked over the collar of his white undershirt. "I might —"

Please don't say it. Not unless you . . . Breath held, eyes shut, he waited. And waited.

"Um." She gave his shirt a little tug. He looked at her, and she looked away. "Let's get this over with."

"Sure." He ground his teeth, then glanced at her hand. "You'll have to let me go."

"I know, I just" Her fingers slid up the length of his throat. She licked her lips again, deliberately, as though savoring the last drop of something sweet. Or slightly salty. "Will you —"

"God, woman! You're going to drive me insane!" He took her face between his hands and kissed her, groaning when her lips and body fitted against his. Slick, peach-flavored lip gloss smeared everywhere. The depths of her mouth held pure, hot sin. But the tentative touch of her tongue was almost innocent. Letting out a gruff sound, he deepened the kiss, loving how she clung to his shoulders and took everything he gave. In this moment, she accepted him. Because her head wasn't telling her not to.

This woman — this unhindered, passionate woman — usually hid from the world. But he'd gotten glimpses in the past of all her many facets. The sweet, eager-to-please girl. The clever imp. The hot-blooded tease — who didn't often come out to play.

I won't let you stash them and be all proper, darlin'. Not this time.

He caressed her tongue with his, then grazed the sensitive spot at the roof of her mouth. She bunched up the collar of his shirt in her hands like she was afraid he'd get away. And he wanted to stay with her more than she'd ever understand.

If only his needs were different. Or hers.

But his body's needs seemed normal enough now. His pulse raced and his dick got hard. Like any guy who wanted a woman.

"I'm willing to try, Oriana." He sucked on her bottom lip, then moved down to kiss the slender length of her throat. "Not here, but when this is done, we'll go out to dinner and act like a regular couple. If you can forget what you saw and what I said —"

"No. I won't forget and I won't pretend." Oriana retreated a step and put a finger on his lips. "I already told you I wouldn't do that to you."

He felt like she'd just thrown ice water in his face. She wouldn't even give him a chance. Not that he blamed her. What she'd seen him and Sloan do would traumatize most women.

Her fingers stroked along his cheek, then delved into his hair. She rose up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss. "You said we should take this one step at a time. How about we do that?"

"Yeah." Drawing her into a firm embrace, he pressed his lips to her brow before backing. "Let's do that."

* * * *

Black leather boots, a book bag, and a white jacket were strewn across the bathroom floor. Sloan followed Perron, confused as hell when he saw who was inside. He hadn't expected to see *her* again. Wasn't sure he wanted to.

Oriana Delgado sat on the wide, gray laminate counter, bare feet on the edge of the white sink, forehead resting on the mirror. The reflection showed him her face was blotchy, like she'd been crying. Sloan didn't feel an ounce of pity for her. What could this stuck-up brat possibly have to cry about?

"Oriana," Perron said. "They're here."

Her eyes pressed shut, she gave a jerky nod, then hopped off the counter. Looking unsteady on her feet, she turned to face them. "I—"

Perron stopped her mid-turn and ran his hands down her back. His fingers brushed the exposed flesh of her ass where the bottom of her dress had twisted to one side. Sloan's mouth went dry. That heart-shaped butt was just made to fit in his palms, made

for him to squeeze while he . . . *fuck!* Even outside, all covered up, she'd tempted him. Now, with her all ruffled and temptingly vulnerable, it was impossible to feign disinterest.

She squirmed as Perron's hand covered her ass. "Max —"

One firm arm around her shoulders held her still as Perron tugged down the hem of her dress. "There you go, love. Not tryin' to take advantage — you were giving the boys a show."

Yeah, she was. Thanks for ruining it, buddy.

"Oh, god." Oriana hid her face under Perron's arm, whispering. "This isn't embarrassing enough?"

"It's all right, darlin'." The southern drawl Perron usually hid in order to fit in crept into his tone as it deepened with concern. He kissed the top of her head and murmured into her hair. "Would you like for me to ask them?"

Whiskey-colored eyes flicked from one man to the next, paused on Sloan, and closed before she pressed her face to Perron's chest and mumbled. "No, I will. I'm just . . ."

Sloan grinned. *Surrounded?*

Mason moved into the room, and the door drifted shut behind him. "Is this about Stanton? Are you ready to leave him?"

"I can't leave him." Her lips parted in a wide O before she snapped them shut.

"Oh, please —" Sloan scowled when Perron gave him a dirty look. Did the man seriously think he'd waste his time listening to her drama?

Before Sloan could tell them all to enjoy the evening and take off, Mason crossed the room to stand over the girl in full white-knight mode.

"What does that bastard have on you?"

"N-nothing —" Oriana seemed to be trying to burrow under Perron's jersey. Her words were muffled against his chest. "Forget it. Max, please bring me h" She shook her head. "Somewhere."

"Are you sure?" Perron frowned, massaging her shoulders when she didn't answer. "You can trust them, I wouldn't have suggested this otherwise. Just spit it out."

She gave him a you-can't-be-serious look, angled away from him, and crossed her arms over her chest, causing her breasts to strain against the tight black laces of her corset. Sloan struggled with the overwhelming urge to wrench her out of Perron's arms and bury his face in her cleavage.

Which would likely get him slapped. Unless he showed her what a decent guy he could be. His pulse thrummed low in his gut, then descended a little more. *Yeah, time to play nice.*

"Relax, Perron." He shoved his hands in his pockets and took a step back. "She'll talk when she's ready."

Her grateful smile told him he was headed in the right direction.

"I can do this." She bent to pick up her jacket and sucked in a shallow breath. Her words sounded strangled, like she couldn't breathe right. "Just give me a minute."

She straightened and her face went white. One hand hovered over her chest.

"Fine." Perron took the jacket from her and laid it on the counter by the sink. "But in the meantime, how 'bout you get out of that dress."

Fuck! Much as he'd love to see her strip, he couldn't see the girl doing that with them all watching. Probably wouldn't take much for *Perron* to get her naked, but if he planned to seduce her, why drag the rest of them along? What the hell was the man up to?

"Out of this" She gulped in air like she was standing on the edge of a pool, about to take a plunge into the deep end. Then she gave each of Sloan's men a long look—while avoiding looking at him at all—and let out a noisy breath. "Yeah, I guess that's a good place to start." She put her fingernails between her lips and backed towards the stalls. "I'll explain when I" She smacked the stall door and stumbled inside. "Please don't leave."

The door clicked shut.

"What's going on, Perron?" T.J.'s pale eyes flashed with rage. He tried to step between Sloan and Perron. "You better start talking or —"

Sloan sidestepped and did his best to keep the big man out of Perron's reach of Perron's throat. "Calm down. He'll tell us."

"Not for me to tell." Perron leaned his elbows on the counter behind him. At a loud *thump* from the stalls he cleared his throat. "Need some help, darlin'?"

"Umm" The girl sounded like someone was choking the life out of her. She groaned and there was another thump. "Maybe someone could give me something to change into —"

Vanek skirted around them. "Come to the locker room with me. I'm sure I've got something. You'd float in the other guys clothes, but I'm not that much bigger than you."

Sloan grabbed Vanek by the back of his shirt when he reached for the door. "Go get the clothes. She'll change in here." Sloan's eyes narrowed when the boy opened his mouth to interrupt. "Alone."

"No!"

Every man in the room went still at Oriana's shout. Something crashed into the wall hard enough to make the stalls shake. A sob got Sloan moving. Perron reached the stall a step ahead of him.

"Oriana?" The muscles in Perron's forearm flexed as he took hold of the top of the door, looking ready to tear it right off the hinges.

"I'm okay . . . I'm just" Oriana sniffed, then sighed. "I'm stuck."

"Do you want me to come in there and help you?"

"Would you?"

A devilish smile slanted Perron's lips. "Gladly."

Sloan mentally counted all the reasons he shouldn't knock his friend's perfect teeth down his throat. He got stuck on *one* . . . when Mason spoke up.

"I've got a better idea." Mason folded his arms over his chest and gave Perron the look he usually saved for when playtime was about to get real serious. Whips and chains serious.

Now you're in for it. Sloan leaned on the wall by the stall and smirked when Perron nervously glanced his way.

When Mason cleared his throat, Perron jumped. "What?"

"You obviously know something. We've all been asked to stay and neither of you are telling us anything." Mason waited for Perron's nod, then continued. "If you want to keep this between you, fine. But if we're being included, for whatever reason, I want to know why. Now."

The lock clicked. The door opened a crack. Oriana peeked out at them and spoke so quietly Sloan had to hold his breath to hear her. "Don't blame Max, he's doing this for me. I need something I can use against my father. He threatened to cut me off if I break up with Paul. Changing his mind shouldn't take much – he won't risk me going as far as my sister did –"

"What does Silver have to do with this?" Sloan's sharp tone had all the men staring at him, but he didn't give a damn. He'd known Silver for all of a month – couple of years after Delgado acquired the team. She had to be the most self-centered, high-maintenance woman he'd ever met. Not his type at all, and she hadn't taken it well when he'd say so.

Tough. He didn't perform on demand.

Oriana gave Perron a helpless look. Perron held up a hand and shook his head, probably having guessed where Sloan's thoughts had gone. "No one has to do anything. She's just gonna walk out of here with all of us; make it look like something was going on by getting out of her clothes –"

"I'm liking this idea so far." Vanek sidled between Sloan and Mason and pulled off his jersey. He bunched it up to toss it to Oriana. "Even if this don't work, imagine what the guys will say –"

"You're not gonna look like some big stud if that's what you're thinking, Vanek." Sloan snatched the jersey, feeling Oriana's eyes on him as he paced to the sink. He fisted the jersey in his hand and rested his knuckles on the edge of the sink. "As a matter of

fact, she's just going to use us to get what she wants – should be something in this for us, but there won't be."

The stall door opened all the way. He watched Oriana's reflection as she slipped out and moved to stand next to Perron.

"What do you think should be in it for you, Mr. Callahan?"

Sloan shrugged. "At least a little show . . ." Her bottom lip quivered, and he groaned. "Shit. I'm kidding. Don't start blubbering." He tossed the jersey to Perron. "Help her get changed; I wanna get this over with."

Expecting Perron to take her into the stall, Sloan hefted himself up on the counter to sit and wait. Oriana crossed the room and bent down to pick up one of her boots.

He had a second to wonder why before she flung it at his head. The sharp heel nicked the arm he shielded himself with, then clattered on the floor.

"What the hell!"

She came at him so fast he thought she'd claw at him like an angry cat. She stopped a foot away and dug those very sharp looking nails into her palms. Fists pressed to her sides she stared at him, opening her mouth twice before she finally spoke.

"I don't use people and I don't 'blubber.' I would really appreciate your help – I know I'm not much to look at, but still . . ." She blinked fast and held her hand up when he pushed off the counter and stepped forward. "Please don't make fun of me anymore. I don't like it."

Make fun of her? What the . . . "I wasn't –"

"Shut up." Perron glared at Sloan like he'd just called the girl some nasty name and rubbed Oriana's arms. "You are beautiful. But you don't have to –"

"Please get it off me." Oriana turned her head away from the men. Perron slung the jersey over his shoulder and went to work on the knotted ribbon of her corset.

Sloan studied her stiff posture and frowned. "Perron –"

"Not now, Callahan." Perron murmured something to Oriana, and she nodded.

The corset opened wide, revealing soft round breasts covered by sheer black lace, quivering with the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Lovely – but the girl looked ready to hyperventilate.

Taking hold of the bottom of her dress, Perron gave Oriana a bracing smile. "Arms up."

Oriana put her arms up. Her face was sickly white.

Sloan couldn't take it any longer. "Perron, stop. She can't –"

"Yes, I can." Oriana took a deep breath. "Do it, Max."

Perron started lifting the dress but paused when she winced. He knelt and looked at something on her thigh. "Ouch. Why didn't you tell me you got hurt?"

"It's just a little burn."

"It's pretty red." Perron didn't sound so sure of himself anymore. He stood and took her hand. "Come on, we'll go to my place. I'll take care of this, and then –"

"I want it off!" She twisted her hand free when Perron shook his head and grabbed the hem of the dress like she wanted to tear it from her body. "I wore this for him and I hate it! Like my father said, like Callahan implied" She hissed in air through her teeth. "I look cheap."

Jesus, her father and Paul had done a number on her. Never mind the dress, the girl didn't look comfortable in her own skin. And he hadn't helped matters with his crude comments. The reddened flesh made him think of the marks he'd leave if he got his hands on her, but concern overrode his baser impulses.

He held out his hand. "Oriana –"

"I'm fine, Mr. Callahan." A few deep inhales, and she actually managed a smile. "Just stand back and enjoy the show."

"We certainly will." Mason used the husky tone all the ladies seemed to like, yet his eyes trailed over Oriana in a way most women found offensive. Strange contradiction, 'specially since this woman didn't seem the least bit offended.

She flushed and ducked her head. "Maybe you can help me, since Max won't."

Perron grabbed her by the hips before she could go to Mason. "I didn't say I wouldn't."

"Stop stalling and do it then."

Aren't we bossy? Sloan shook his head when Perron simply grinned and obediently stepped up to her. Peeling the dress up over her head, he gave them all an unobstructed view of her beautiful body. Her black lace bra and panties were so sheer he could see her puckered nipples and waxed pussy. His gaze trailed over the exposed flesh, butter smooth, naturally tanned – he wondered whether she'd mark easily. The head of his dick scraped against the inside of his zipper. Lousy time to go commando. He shoved his hands in his pockets and did his best to unobtrusively shift his dick away from the metal teeth. *Damn, damn, damn.*

Perron lowered the jersey over her head, then pulled her hair free of the collar. "There you go. What does my *lady* require now?"

At the emphasis on "lady," Oriana's lips parted. "Tim told you about *that*?"

"Yes, ma'am." Perron gave her a mock bow. "Command me, Mistress. I am eager to serve."

Sloan groaned. "Tell me you're not going to make us watch this."

"We've got some time to kill." Perron shifted his gaze to Sloan in the barely perceptible way he did when he was about to make a blind pass. "If nothin' else, watching me make an ass of myself ought to be entertaining."

"Not really," Mason said under his breath.

Shaking her head, Oriana put her hands on her hips. "Be serious, Max."

"Try it," Perron said.

Oriana smoothed her hands down her sides and bunched the bottom of the jersey in her hands, tugging as though she wanted to make it longer. She licked her bottom lip and pointed at the floor in front of her. "Come here. I liked the position you were in before. Get on your knees; I'm going to kiss you."

At Sloan's side, Mason coughed back a laugh. Perron glanced over and winked. Then he got on his knees and waited.

Cupping Perron's face in her hands, Oriana leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss on his lips. When Perron made no effort to return the kiss, she let out a frustrated sound and raked her fingers into his hair. Sloan winced when she jammed her mouth over Perron's and their teeth clinked.

"Shoot." She touched Perron's bottom lip with her thumb. "I'm sorry –"

"Don't worry about it. You 'bout done?" Perron rose at her nod. "I've a mind to ask you something."

"Okay." Oriana clasped her hands in front of her and rocked on her bare feet. As the silence lengthened, she wrung her hands and glanced across the room. Perron cleared his throat and she jumped. "What?"

"One step at a time, right?"

"Right." She gave the hem of the jersey a sharp tug.

Perron gave her a level look. "Good. Go sit on the counter."

At the command in Perron's tone, Sloan stood a little straighter and noticed Mason doing the same. T.J. stood near the door, arms crossed, brow furrowed. Vanek had gone almost as white as Oriana.

Oriana approached the sink, stopped, and shook her head. "I'd rather not."

Perron closed the distance between them. "Why? Are you afraid of what might happen? I might could tell *you* to get on your knees instead, but that be going a bit too far."

"You're missing the whole *Lady* in charge, Max."

My cue. Sloan sidestepped to the sink, then slid along the counter until he stood right behind Oriana. Her spine stiffened, but she kept her eyes on Perron.

"You don't really want to be in charge, Oriana." Sloan let his breath out slowly so she'd feel the heat of it on the back of her neck. She shivered, and he grinned at Perron over her shoulder. The man had read her perfectly. "Think how it would feel to be at another's mercy. To surrender."

"You're making fun of me again." She shifted, as though to get away from him.

He put his hands on her hips and turned her to face the mirror. "When you look in the mirror, I don't think you see what I see – what any of us sees." He pressed a soft kiss on the sensitive hollow behind her ear and whispered. "I'm not making fun of you. But I need to know what you want."

Her hair brushed his lips as she turned her head to look at him. Eyes wide, lips parted, she looked ready to do anything he asked. To surrender to *him*.

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